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Contemporary Norwegian Prints

THE ARTS COUNCIL 1956

Foreword

This exhibition of Norwegian Prints, which has been chosen to tour in this country for a year, presents the work of six artists who are as yet little known on this side of the North Sea, and consists almost entirely of prints made during the past decade. The tradition of print-making in Norway is a strong one and still reflects the influence of the great expressionist painter Edvard Munch, whose lithographs and woodcuts (exhibited recently in this country) are a landmark in the history of graphic art. Munch had a great and individual feeling for the use of colour in his prints, and it is interesting to note that the handling of colour still exists in the work of a later generation of Norwegian graphic artists. While the essence of print-making is, and must continue to be, an art of black and white, traditional techniques lost their force and vigour some thirty years ago. Today there is a welcome revival in interest both on the part of artists themselves, on whose powers as draughtsmen and painters their skill in the graphic arts must depend, and the public, whose interest is aroused when a sincere and contemporary vision is given expression through the old existing technical processes.

We are much indebted to the Office of Cultural Relations of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for putting these prints at our disposal, and to Mr Hambro, the Cultural Attaché in London, for help in matters of detail in connection with the exhibition. We must also thank Mr Jan Askeland for his brief but interesting introduction on Norwegian graphic art.

PHILIP JAMES

Introduction

In Norway, the art of painting has always attracted the keenest interest and inspired the warmest affection among the visual arts. Sculpture is usually considered at a respectful distance, and the graphic arts have awakened the interest of the general public only during the last ten or twenty years. But today prints are popular in a real sense. The reason is, of course, partly that a print is—or can be—comparatively cheap to acquire, while at the same time it may be just as decorative and colourful as a painting. Prints are no longer collected in portfolios and taken out on rare occasions to be scrutinized through the magnifying-glass of the connoisseur: they are eminently suited to adorn the walls in modern interiors.

Norwegian print-makers are mainly recruited from the ranks of the painters. They form a phalanx of uncompromising individualists, each with his very personal ideas on technical as well as formal problems. If they have a feature in common, it is a passion for technical experiment. Some go to the lengths of inventing completely new methods, others are content with a sometimes extremely irregular use of old and accepted techniques. Another general characteristic is their delight in telling a story, which can be seen most clearly in the works of Edvard Munch, the greatest Norwegian print-maker and painter in modern times.

Norwegian artists did not begin to occupy themselves seriously with making prints until the 1890s. Before that time, some of the great, romantic landscape-painters—I. C. Dahl, Thomas Fearnley, Hans Gude—had tried their hand at etching. Fearnley, who had for a time belonged to an English etching club, was the only one among them

to show a deeper interest in the technique, but he died before he had time to produce much. Norwegian print-making is usually considered to begin in 1894, when Edvard Munch produced his first drypoint etching. This happened during one of his frequent stays on the Continent, where the interest in prints was very much alive, and where the artists had professional printing presses at their disposal. Munch soon began to take an interest in lithography and woodcut as well, and when he died in 1944 he left more than 700 prints. In the development of the woodcut he is generally considered a pioneer. Among young German artists his influence was marked, but in his home country his prints attracted little notice. When in 1899 a class for etchers was established at the School of Arts and Crafts in Oslo, the teaching was carried out on traditional lines, technically as well as in matters of pictorial style, in accordance with the more conservative trends on the Continent.

A number of painters attended the class for short periods, but for the majority of them this training became no more than an interlude, which had no real influence on their general development. The art of painting still loomed so largely in the artists' minds as to overshadow the more intimate art of print-making. The colour woodcut began, however, to attract a certain interest, but apart from Edvard Munch, only Nicolay Astrup contributed anything of lasting importance. Astrup died in 1928, and not for another ten years did Norwegian print-making in its modern form begin to flourish. At first the colour woodcut attracted most attention, but since the Second World War, the interest in colour lithography has been on the increase. Several of our most important painters have made tentative experiments in this technique, and a few have concentrated on it in a serious way. The development has been further stimulated by the activities of various organizations, recently formed to bring original works of art at reasonable prices to the general public.

A taste for technical experiment has already been mentioned as characteristic of Norwegian print-makers. Not all of them live in towns, and access to expert technical assistance is limited. Consequently a majority of the prints—the lithographs excepted—are executed from first to last by the artists themselves, and as many of them are self-taught—as were both Munch and Astrup—their attitude towards the established rules of print-making is extremely liberal. Many Norwegian prints are virtually monographs; the number of printed copies is at any rate usually small, and slight variations can often be discerned among the separate copies.

Experiments in form and style are more rare. As the majority of the print-makers are also painters, the prints naturally follow the styles of Norwegian painting. Nature is the dominant theme, as is to be expected in a country with such a striking and varied landscape. One of the few who have plunged deeply into an abstract style is Knut Rumohr: his prints possess, however, a distinctly lyrical quality, and so do the more realistic compositions of Harald Kihle and Arne E. Holm. There is a dramatic seriousness about Sigurd Winge's work, while Rolf Rude and Paul René Gauguin represent a gayer and more imaginative aspect of Norwegian art.

JAN ASKELAND

Paul Rene Gauguin

Born Copenhagen 1911. Taught himself draughtsmanship. First exhibition 1936. Grandson of Paul Gauguin.

Arne E. Holm

Born Bergen 1911. Studied at the Norwegian Technical College and at the Norwegian Academy of Art. Professor of Architecture at the Norwegian Technical College. First exhibition 1937.

1. The Bogy of the Mountain
   woodcut, 1947

2. Birds along the Shore
   woodcut, 1949

3. Marrow Flower
   woodcut, 1949

4. Cock
   woodcut, 1949

5. Tall Girl
   woodcut, 1948

6. Greetings
   woodcut, 1947

7. Forest Fire
   woodcut, 1949

8. Commedia dell 'Arte
   lithograph, 1955

9. Gondolas
   lithograph, 1952

10. Church Interior
    lithograph, 1955

11. Venetian Fantasy
    lithograph, 1952

12. Seagulls
    lithograph, 1954

13. The Lighthouse
    lithograph, 1953

Harald Kihle

Born Borre 1905. Studied at the Norwegian State School of Arts & Crafts, the Norwegian Academy of Art and under Gromaire in Paris. First exhibition 1932.

14. Parisian Model
woodcut, 1938

14a. Madeleine
woodcut, 1944

15. Johan's
woodcut, 1955

15a. Peasant VI
woodcut, 1955

16. The Pack-horse
woodcut, 1950

16a. Peasant
woodcut, 1949

17. Meeting
woodcut, 1951

17a. The Gryte Brook (Illustration for Vinje's 'Storegut')
woodcut, 1948

Rolf Rude

Born Oslo 1899. Studied at the Norwegian State School of Arts & Crafts. First exhibition 1923.

18. Dance
lithograph, 1954

19. Dream of the North
lithograph, 1954

20. Mouth Organ
lithograph, 1954

21. Man and Horse
lithograph, 1953

22. Fountain
lithograph, 1953

Knut Rumohr

Born Bergen 1916. Studied at the Norwegian State School of Arts & Crafts and at the Norwegian Academy of Art. First exhibition 1939.

23. Shakespearian Motive
woodcut, 1955

24. Cock
woodcut, 1952

25. Figures
woodcut, 1952

26. Composition
woodcut, 1952

27. Composition I
woodcut, 1952

Sigurd Winge

Born Hamburg 1909. Studied at the Norwegian Academy of Art. First exhibition 1933.

28. Cairns
drypoint and etching, 1948

29. A Landslide
drypoint and etching, 1949

30. My Wife
drypoint and etching, 1946

31. Sketch for Oslo School of Commerce
drypoint and etching, 1955

32. Dance Macabre
drypoint and etching, 1947

33. On the Way
drypoint and etching, 1954

34. Playtime
drypoint and etching, 1953